

The Mardi Gras Mystery

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

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"Very well, then, the meeting is called to order!" Jachin Fell smiled as he rapped on the desk before him. "Election of officers—no, wait! The first thing on hand is to give our company a name. Suggestions?"

"I was thinking of that last night," said Lucie, smiling a little. "Why not call it the 'American Prince Oil company'?" And her eyes darted to Grammont merrily.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Jachin Fell. "My vote falls with yours, my dear—I'll fill in the blanks with that name. Now to the election of officers."

"I nominate Jachin Fell for president," said Grammont, quickly.

"Seconded!" exclaimed the girl, gayly, a little color in her pale cheeks. "Any other nominations? If not, so approved and ordered," rattled Fell, laughingly. "For the office of treasurer—"

"Miss Lucie Ledanois!" said Grammont. "Move nominations be closed."

"Seconded and carried by a two-thirds vote of stockholders," chirped Fell in his toneless voice. "So approved and ordered. For secretary—"

"Our third stockholder," put in Lucie. "He'll have to be an officer, of course!"

"Seconded and carried. So approved and ordered." Mr. Fell rapped on the table. "We will now have the report of our expert geologist in further detail than yet given."

Grammont cut off finding the oil; he was not carried away by the gay mock-seriousness of Jachin Fell, and he remained grave. He went on to relate how he had secured the lease option upon the adjoining land, and suggested that other such options be secured at once upon other property in the neighborhood. He handed the option to Fell, who laid it with the other documents.

"And now I have a proposal of my own to make," said Jachin Fell. He appeared sobered, as though influenced by Grammont's manner. "Although we've actually found oil on the place, there is no means of telling how much we'll find when we drill, or what quality it will be. Is that not correct, Mr. Grammont?"

"Entirely so," assented Grammont. "The chances are, of course, that we'll find oil in both quality and quantity. On the other hand, the seepage may be all there is. Oil is a gamble from start to finish. Personally, however, I would gamble heavily on this prospect."

"Naturally," said Mr. Fell. "However, I have been talking over the oil business with a number of men actively engaged in it in the Houma field. I think that I may safely say that I can dispose of the mineral rights to our company's land, together with this lease option secured yesterday on the adjoining land, for a sum approximating one hundred and fifty thousand dollars; reserving to our company a sixteenth interest in any oil located on the property. Personally, I believe this can be done, and I am willing to undertake the negotiations if so empowered by a vote of our stockholders. Lucie, you do not mind if we smoke, I know? Let me offer you a cigar, Mr. Grammont."

Grammont took one offered him, and lighted it with a startled silence.

"I nominate Jachin Fell for President," said Grammont quickly.

Fell's proposal came to him as a distinct shock, and already he was viewing it in the light of prompt suspicion. "Why," exclaimed Lucie, wild-eyed, "that would be fifty thousand dollars to each of us, and not a cent expended!"

"In case it went through on that basis," added Jachin Fell, his eyes on Grammont, "I would vote that the entire sum go to Miss Ledanois. Her land alone is involved. If she then wishes to invest with us in a new company to exploit other fields, well and good. One moment, my dear! Do not protest this suggestion. The sixteenth interest reserved to our company would provide both Mr. Grammont and me with a substantial reward for our slight activity in the matter. I don't forget that interest, for it might amount to a large figure."

"Right," assented Grammont, would second your vote, Mr. Fell; I think the idea very just and proper.

that Miss Ledanois should receive the entire amount."

Lucie seemed a trifle bewildered.

"But—Henry!" she exclaimed.

"What do you think of selling the lease to these other men?"

Grammont eyed the smoke from his cigar reflectively, quite conscious that Mr. Fell was regarding him very steadily.

"I can't answer for you, Lucie," he said at last. "I would not presume to advise."

Mr. Fell looked slightly relieved. Lucie, however, persisted.

"What would you do, then, if you were in my place?"

Grammont shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case," he said, slowly, "I would gamble. We know oil is in that ground; we know that it has been found in large quantities at Houma or near there. To my mind there is no doubt whatever that under your land lies a part of the same oil field—and a rich one. To sell fifteen-sixths of that oil for a hundred and fifty thousand is to give it away. I would sooner take my chances on striking a twenty-thousand barrel gusher and having the whole of it to myself. However, by all means disregard my words; that is not my affair."

Lucie glanced at Jachin Fell.

"You think it is the best thing to do; Henry does not," mused the girl. "I know that you're both thinking of me—of getting that money for me. Just the same, Uncle Jachin, I—I won't be prudent! I'll gamble! Besides," she added with smiling naivete, "I'm not a bit willing to give up having a real oil company the very minute it is formed! So we'll outvote you, Uncle Jachin."

Despite their tension, the two men smiled at her final words.

"That notion of mine has not yet been made," said Fell. Her rejection of his proposal had no effect upon his shyly smooth manner. "Will you excuse us one moment, Lucie? If I may speak with you in the outer office, Mr. Grammont, I would like to show you some confidential matters which might influence your decision in this regard."

Lucie nodded and leaned back in her chair.

Grammont accompanied Fell to the outer office, where Fell sent the stenographer to keep Lucie company.

When the door had closed and they were alone, Fell took a chair and motioned Grammont to another. A cold brusqueness was evident in his manner.

"Grammont," he said, briskly, "I am going to make that motion, and I want you to vote with me against Lucie. Unfortunately, I have only a third of the voting power. I might argue Lucie into agreement, but she is a difficult person to argue with. So I mean that you shall vote with me—and I'm going to put my cards on the table before you."

"Ah!" Grammont regarded him coolly. "Your cards will have to be powerful persuaders."

"They are," returned Jachin Fell. "I have been carefully tending up to this point—the point of selling. I have practically arranged the whole affair. I propose to sell the mineral rights in that land, largely on the strength of the signed statement you gave me a few moments ago. That statement is going to be given wide publicity, and it will be substantiated by other reports on the oil seepage."

"You interest me strangely," Grammont leaned back in his chair. The eyes of the two men met and held in cold challenge, cold hostility. "What's your motive, Fell?"

"I'll tell you: it's the interest of Lucie Ledanois." In the gaze of Fell was a strange earnestness. In those pale gray eyes was now a light of fierce sincerity which startled and warmed Grammont. Fell continued with a trace of excitement in his tone.

"I've known that girl all her life. Grammont, and I love her as a father. I loved her mother before her—in a different way. I can tell you that at this moment Lucie is poor. Her house is mortgaged, she does not know, in fact, just how poor she really is. Of course, she will accept no money from me in gift. But for her to get a hundred and fifty thousand in a business deal will solve all her problems, set her on her feet for life!"

"I see," said Grammont with harsh impulse. "What do you get out of it?"

Grammont stirred in his chair.

"Yes," he said, low-voiced. "Yes by heavens, I do refuse!"

With an effort he checked hotly impulsive words that were on his tongue. One word now might ruin him. He dared not say that he did not want to see Fell's money pass into the hands of Lucie—money gained by fraud and theft and crime! He dared not give his reasons for refusing. He meant now to crush Fell utterly—but one wrong word would give the man full warning. He must say nothing.

"It's not straight work, Fell. Regardless of your motives, I refuse to join you."

Jachin Fell sighed slightly, and laid down his cigar with precision.

"Grammont," his voice came with the softly purring menace of a tiger's throat-tone. "I shall now adjourn this company meeting for two days, until Saturday morning, in order to give you a little time to reconsider. Today is Thursday. By Saturday—"

"I need no time," said Grammont.

"But you will need it. I suppose you know that Bob Mallard has been arrested for perjury? You are aware of the evidence against him—all circumstantial?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Plant's Remarkable Growth.

A recent note in science records what I believed to be the temperate zone record for a single season's growth of a shoot of the tree type of woody plant. This quite phenomenal shoot grew from the stump of a beheaded Paulownia and reached a height of 21 feet 6 inches, a circumference of 10 inches at the base, and had 24 leaves, one of which, measured in late July, was found to be 28 inches long in the largest dimension.

been poetic justice to make him hand over a small fortune to Lucie! But that deal is off, since he's in jail. And do you know why young Mallard wanted to buy the land? For the same reason you don't want to sell. I sent him out there and he saw that oil seepage, as I meant that he should! He thought he would skin Lucie out of her land, not dreaming that I had prepared a nice little trap to swallow him. And now you come along—"

"Man, what are you driving at?" exclaimed Grammont. He was startled by what he read in the other man's face.

"Merely that I planted that oil seepage myself—or had it done by men I could trust," said Jachin Fell, calmly. He got back in his chair and took up his cigar with an air of finality. "The



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confession is shameless. I love Lucie more than my own ethical purity. Besides, I intend to wrong no one in the matter."

Grammont sat stunned beyond words. The oil seepage—a plant.

There was no reason to doubt what Fell said. Grammont believed the little man sincere in his love for Lucie.

"No matter what the outcome, your reputation will not be affected," said Fell, quietly. "The company which will buy this land of Lucie's is controlled by me. You understand? Even if no oil is ever found there, I shall see to it that you will not be injured because of that signed statement."

Grammont nodded in dull comprehension. He realized that Fell had devised this whole business scheme with infernal ingenuity; had devised it in order to take a hundred and fifty thousand dollars out of his own pocket and put it into that of Lucie. It was a present which the girl would never accept as a gift, but which, if it came in the way of business, would make her financially independent. Not only would be defrauded. There was no chicane about it. The thing was straight enough.

"That's not quite all of my plan," pursued Fell, as though reading Grammont's muttered thoughts. "The minute this news becomes public, the minute your statement is published, there will be a tremendous boom in that whole section. I shall take charge of Lucie's money, and within three weeks I should double it, treble it, for her. Before the boom bursts she will be out of it all, and wealthy. Now, my dear Grammont, I do not presume that you will still refuse to vote with me? I have been quite frank, you see."

Grammont stirred in his chair.

"Yes," he said, low-voiced. "Yes by heavens, I do refuse!"

With an effort he checked hotly impulsive words that were on his tongue. One word now might ruin him. He dared not say that he did not want to see Fell's money pass into the hands of Lucie—money gained by fraud and theft and crime! He dared not give his reasons for refusing. He meant now to crush Fell utterly—but one wrong word would give the man full warning. He must say nothing.

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MARKETS

DETROIT QUOTATIONS

Feed and Grain

WHEAT—Cash No. 2 red, \$1.41; No. 2 white, \$1.40; No. 2 mixed, \$1.39.

YELLOW CORN—Cash No. 2, 89c; No. 3, 88c; No. 4, 87c; No. 5, 86c.

BARLEY—Cash No. 2, 82c; No. 3, 81c; No. 4, 80c; No. 5, 79c.

RYE—Cash No. 2, 94c; No. 3, 93c; No. 4, 92c; No. 5, 91c.

BUCKWHEAT—Cash No. 2, 94c; No. 3, 93c; No. 4, 92c; No. 5, 91c.

CLAY—No. 1 timothy, \$16.50; No. 2 timothy, \$16.00; No. 3 timothy, \$15.50; No. 4 timothy, \$15.00; No. 5 timothy, \$14.50.

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